

~ Artist and Familiar ~

by Joseph Nechvatal

"The predominant element in the pleasure to be obtained from overthrowing Power, from becoming a master without slaves, and from rectifying the past, is the subjectivity of each individual. The cause of free self-realization must always embrace subjectivity - and thus cease to be a cause. Only from this starting point can we accede to those vertiginous heights where every gratification falls within the grasp of each."
~ Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*

I

Austin Osman Spare is an artist in whom we cannot be satisfied. Among the many complexities that have transpired in today's society primarily due to the delirious effects of information-communication proliferation, is the changing nature of artistic definition. Recently contemporary thought has been concerned with the poststructuralist deliberation on the notion of the subject; in order to question its traditionally privileged epistemological status. Particularly in respect to the artist, there has been a sustained effort to question the role of the artist/subject as the intending and knowing autonomous creator of art - as its coherent originator. For me, the semi-automatic drawings of A. O. Spare from the 1920s have become emblematic of the rigorous scrutiny of what Jacques Derrida has described of as logocentrism: the once held distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity; between public and private; between fantasy and reality; between the subconscious and the conscious realm.

Today these distinctions are breaking down under the pressure of our speeding and omnipresent computer communications technologies. We are now part of a technologically hallucinogenic culture that functions along the lines of a dream, free from the strictures of time and space; free from some of our traditional earthly limits which have been broken down by the instantaneous nature of electronic communications. The modernist existential concept of the singular individual has been supplanted by the media-reproduced individual, in a way liberated from what used to be thought of as historical time, vaporously existing in a technologically stored eternity (simulacrum-hyperreality). This quality of phantasmagorical and perverse displacement has formulated a new vision of existence which Baudrillard has called pornographic and what Deleuze & Guattari call schizoid. Teleologically, both of these descriptions apply aptly to the drawings of A.O. Spare in a collection of ways which I will make apparent shortly. For those, and they are numerous, who are not familiar with the work of Spare, let me first provide some rudimentary background on him.

Austin Osman Spare (1888? - 1956) was born the son of a London policeman. Doom loomed large in Fin de Siècle England as Spare came to age; and thus his development into what can now be recognized as a late-decadent, perversely ornamental, graphic dandy in the manner of Felicien Rops and/or Aubrey Beardsley can be contextualized. As a young man he was for a brief period of time a member of the "Silver Star"; Alister Crowley's magical order. Spare's lifelong interest in the theory and practice of sorcery was initiated, he recounted, by his sexual relationship at a very young age with an elderly woman named Paterson. To perform sorcery, for Spare, was a practice meant to ensorcel, to encircle, and to ensnare spirits. It is not quite the same thing as practicing magic, which is the art of casting spells or glamours. For Spare, as well as for Crowley, Tantrixesque sex held the means of access to their magical systems. However it is in Spare's conception of radical and total freedom, consisting in the unrestricted expression of what he held to be the "inherent dream", where we first detect the seditious and chaotic philosophy which drove a prong between himself and Crowley and every other esoteric system but his own brand of chaos magic. In 1905, at the tender age of 19, Spare self-published his first collection of drawings in a book of aphorisms entitled EARTH INFERNO . In it, he lamented the death of the "universal women lying barren on the parapet of the subconscious's", and he called for a revival of the "primitive women", castigating what he called the "inferno of the normal". EARTH INFERNO disparages the world of humdrum banality in favor of an exotic orb which Spare began to reveal in a spate of awesome drawings somewhat reminiscent of the decadent artists previously mentioned.

In 1907, Spare self-published a second collection of drawings in a publication named THE BOOK OF SATYRS which contained acute insights into the social order of his day. In 1909, Spare began work on a third book of drawings entitled THE BOOK OF PLEASURES on which he worked for four years. In 1914 he held his first one-person exhibition at the Baillie Gallery in London. It included many of the semi-automatic sketches he drew while half asleep or in a self-induced trance. Most of Spare's semi-automatic work from 1910 onward were produced in self-induced trances which he claimed were sometimes controlled by intrusive occult intelligence's working through him. He considered his best accomplishments those which he said were produced through him rather than by him, often by the hand of the revenant spirits of Blake, da Vinci, Holbein, and Durer. Not bad virtual company. Spare quite wildly would declare that his was the automatic hand utilized by these deceased masters. Through this automatic and delirious technique he claimed to be able to draw upon "...the profoundest depths of memory..." and to "...tap into the springs of instinct." It is in this highly extravagant practice of openness and swank self-denial that Spare's relevance to the post structuralist - post internet conceptions of the decentered subject are found with his obvious bearing on the antisocial aspects of collective on-line self-permutation. By participating wholeheartedly in his insertion (and semi-faux disappearance) into the transpersonal symbolic economy of the sign through the assumed equivalence of life and death (in what perhaps can be imagined for us as digitized-stored existence after personal death)

Spare remains truly individual if not altogether alone. Such a radical egoless gesture (at the same time, what a bogus collaboration) he fabricated - creating an imposing egotistical conception of a collective and collected self - is a view which counters the long-standing Western Metaphysical phallocratic heroic portrayal of male-selfhood which we all know too well. And yet, doesn't this view of a compiled self, akin to the essence of the death of the subject, offer just a sort of resistance to the structures of logocentric civilization that simulationist theory claimed was impossible? Spare's quite early conception of the illusory coherence of the "I", renders everyone and everything equally phantasmatical (as fabula) akin to the way the electronic-computer-media network can do. In effect his "I" exists only as the passive construct of a system of forces which act through him on the creation of an occult synergistic complex image. This synergistic compounding of the mnemonic threshold encapsulates our current postpostmodern-networked predicament in that the fabulated digital-self today feels sublimated and eclipsed but also freed up by the mammoth computer-media-web. Phantom information bits flow continuously around and through us in a vague endless whirl of unverifiability. This questionable (and perhaps imaginary) data proliferation forms slowly, imperceptibly, bit by bit, into an extensive hypothetical aggregate somewhere deep in the abstruse recesses of our collected digital subconscious, awaiting discharge and reformation.

Perhaps Spare can be understood then as an expression of this eternal verity, recording as he does, vis-a-vis the disinterested trance, this releasing of disembodied fabula. His remarkable magical method suggests a resurgent atavism based on obsession and ecstasy. The subconscious is impregnated by a sustained desire that becomes energized by the supposition that deep memory, the void, responds to longings and can relive original obsessions. Each era has its circumlocutions, its compliances; yet Spare felt it his privilege, even his obligation to sally forth, and to be inordinate in his openness to past representations; but not in any placating or merely plausible way, as often the meager appropriationists and samplers do do. For Spare, only excess may be recompensed. Only opulence which borders on the decadent can offer us this kind of examination of the illusory self, as it arises out of the present day climate of technological and information abundance. Only ideas of multiple selves can adequately represent artists as social communicators anymore. Only transformative notions of the self can accurately reflect the massive transformational effect of webbed high-technology.

II

It is extremely relevant then to consider Spare's means of becoming courageously individual through this kind of frenzied tranced-grouping of the Superego - a transgression of (and by!) his artistic "Masters". The internet is the collective Superego now. In one of Spare's artistic statements he wrote, "Speed is the criterion of the genuine automatic. In the ecstatic condition of revelation from the sub-memory strata, the mind elevates the sexual or inherited powers and depresses the intellectual qualities. So a new atavistic

responsibility is attained by daring to believe - to possess one's own beliefs - without attempting to rationalize spurious ideas from prejudiced and tainted intellectual sources! Art becomes, by this illuminism or ecstatic power, a functional activity expressing in a symbolic language the desire towards joy."

In terms of the exact copy's importance to our electronic era's conception of information as simulation, Spare's claim to meta-individuality in his production seems prophetic. If a substanceless collectively reverberates internally in each of us, if in each of our computers a Superego beyond propensity and will exists and dominates us, than an inner magical detoxification of authority indeed seems futile. We can only act with what authority has passed down to us. But if the search is more simply directed towards not repeating what has been taught, and if what we have learned can be cracked open and drained and transfigured through disinterested trance, then novel panoramas and multiple personalities do have room to emerge. What happens, for example, when our fast paced dumbness and reactionary media codes are problematized by a shift in speed - a slowing down - a halting? Would a new phase in consciousness come when all our previous attachments to speed have been obliterated? What about light? For example, Spare would first exhaust himself before beginning to draw in a somber candle lite room and in a slight trance with no particular idea in mind, thereby reaching deeper and more remote layers of memory, while all the time continuously abhorring the accepted values and maudlin conceits of his day.

The fact that Spare was an occultist and quite possibly a Satanist should not misdirect our appreciation of his endeavor. The logic of the postmodernism internet and of the entire electronic media society is satiated with a parallel overindulgence and counter fusion. One must go all the way through the information society and emerge from out the dark rim of telepresence. It has been said that the hyper-overproduction of simulated perversion is the only site of contestation left today; the only virtual space from which to launch a theoretical attack on the reification of consciousness. I tend to agree. Spare is a metaphor for a viral attack on the whole system. He is the big bang which sucks the virtual economy into the throbbing digital black-hole which awaits to unite and compress and explode.

The ineffable spell of Spare's semiautomatic drawings, with their multifarious and allusive search for something antithetical to the established norm, and with their morbid deviation and subversion of the concept of individuality and authorship, play well upon today's desire to egregiously delimit signification through art and magic. Their form enmeshes and contravenes, alters and disrupts the mundanity of communications in an inexorable, unrecognizable and chimerical way. Like all modes of decadent artistic practice (i.e. Hellenistic, High Gothic, Mannerist, Rococo, Fin de Siècle, Postmodernism) they oppose a dogmatically imposed paradigm with a hyper-logic. Today it is in the endlessly duplicable digital image where we can probe, much as Spare did, for a private occult expression. With Spare the abolition of time was made possible and the barriers between the deceased and living abolished through trance. The extremity of the internet is non-time, is non-death, is repetition, is trance.

A.O. Spare tended to reject what is given him in the world in favor of magick, metaphysics and mise en scene. In his own fashion he created a sphere where deep-memory threatens the common order and questions originality and supplied social codes. His artfulness subverts the Modernistic conception of production- with its emphasis on origin, author and finality - but without merely accepting the artificial, the copy, the simulation, the model. His conjunction of these elements lives with the abstraction of our technomediocratic society but deploys the effects of trance to transcend its limitations. He does not allow the reproductive technology to defeat or negate his arts spiritual significance because he has abandoned the Enlightenment baggage of authorizing categories. Spare explicitly eschewed categorization and instead sought to problematize the authority of the category. He sought to compel us to take notice of the various ways artistic conventions have molded our responses and regulated discursive meaning. The possibilities of a complex entangled erotic configuration springing forth from the Id, in opposition to the judging Superego, made up of mercurial symbols and concepts in opposition to recycled representations - provides an interesting insight into the way Spare's art (with its convoluted compositions made up of vague confiscations) directs us towards the conception of the transformative possibilities of techno-magic.

The hope that Austin Spare's art will show us a way to resist computer software reification is a fragile hope indeed in our electronically-homogenized cyberspace. Such a hope may be less than we deserve, but

it also may be more than we usually allow ourselves to envision. Computer-networked storage makes up a massive electronic subconscious mind, this epitome, this subtle and infinite compendium of all cultural memories which through the use of autism holds the potential of penetrating reification to the level of automatic instinct where "...the I becomes atmospheric". When belief detaches itself from the accessories of convention, desire stands revealed as the ecstasis of the self, ungoverned by its simulated forms. "For I am all sex. What I am not is moral thought, simulating and separating." (Spare)

To not dismiss A. O. Spare (and his concept of the tranced collective self which for us can be reconceived as techno-magical thought) as dilettante folly is to become aware of the fact that underlying everything is the web of connections upon which we can exert more manipulative pressure than we are normally led to believe by the computer-media society of the spectacle.

Books by Austin Osman Spare

EARTH INFERO, 1905

A BOOK OF SATYRS, 1907

THE BOOK OF PLEASURES (SELF LOVE):

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ECSTASY, 1913

THE FOCUS OF LIFE: THE MUTTERINGS OF AAOS, 1921

HYPOCRITES, 1927

A BOOK OF AUTOMATIC DRAWINGS, 1925

(Posthumously published by the Catalpa Press, London, 1972)